

“Now I Know My ABCDs”: Asset-Based Community Development with School Children in Ethiopia

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Asset-based community development (ABCD) is a promising practice for communities to engage in self-determination through the efforts residents invest in identifying community assets, framing and documenting the issues communities face, and taking action to advance quality of life. The ABCD literature does not report on the application of ABCD methods specifically involving children as leaders of community development efforts. This article begins to rectify this limitation by presenting and analyzing the use of ABCD methods by primary school children in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The three-year project engaged 100 primary-school-age children who undertook experiential subprojects to advance their own education involving language development, the performing arts, and community service. Social work educators, students, and practitioners can learn from the involvement of children in this kind of community partnership taking place in Africa. As such, the project is important in informing community development practice with children.

KEY WORDS: *asset-based community development; children; Ethiopia; poverty; service learning*

Asset-based community development (ABCD) is a positive framework for community building. It shifts the perspective of community members from a need orientation to an asset approach in advancing social change (Mathie & Peters, 2014). ABCD involves groups in assessing local strengths and assets, and in identifying how those assets can advance the well-being of families, neighborhoods, and institutions (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). The methodology is inclusive because it brings together community groups whose members are in recovery from either conflict or trauma (MacNeil, 2013). By cutting across stakeholder groups, by assisting one particular age group to invest in positive community building on behalf of their own interests, or in service to other groups, ABCD can encourage a constructive, solution-focused approach to community development (MacNeil, Ragan, & Solberg, 2012). Participants in ABCD can direct resources to bring about positive change, such as supporting the well-being or development of vulnerable children (Ebersohn & Eloff, 2006). Central to ABCD is the surfacing of a common good that can inspire local collaboration (Mengesha, Meshelemiah, & Chuffa, 2015).

The ABCD paradigm recognizes communities as store houses of what McKnight and Block (2012) referred to as abundance of strengths, capacities, capabilities, and know-how. The methodology offers participants a way to self-organize; adopt a positive frame for assessing their communities; appreciate the challenges their communities face; view one another in a positive light, as assets themselves; and organize projects to fill gaps with new or even novel assets. In this manner, asset building increases social capital of a group or a community (Green & Haines, 2016). From the perspective of ABCD, community development is a process of appreciating assets and using them to leverage new assets within a community.

A significant gap in the literature is the absence of real examples of how ABCD can foster dialogue among children and adults concerning community development, the participation of children in the process of ABCD, and the integration of children in the actual process of creating community assets to meet their own needs and address the needs of other groups. The literature addressing the involvement of children and youths in community-building activities suggests that their voices may be muted by adults who dominate such processes.

Commentators on participation of children and youths in community development, such as Hill, Davis, Prout, and Tisdall (2004), noted that young people can be easily marginalized, especially by institutions whose representatives may see children as simply lacking in the virtues essential to participation. In what Matthews (2003) referred to as neighborhood regeneration, the process of community development begins with the dialogues adults have with children and youths about what they see as the necessity of change. Ultimately, from both dialogue and participation, children can become important agents of social betterment who forge partnerships with adults in addressing community issues (Willow, 2001).

Although reports of ABCD methodology do not specify the age of change agents (see, for example, Mathie & Cunningham, 2008), adult leaders in disadvantaged communities are typically the target of such initiatives. The role and participation of children are too often omitted from the ABCD literature, suggesting that they do not have the capacity to undertake such important, and perhaps complex, projects. The example the authors, two of whom were project facilitators, offer does not support this assumption. Through ingenuity, innovation, and motivation, children living in abject poverty were the driving force in a major ABCD project in the Gedam Sefer Community Partnership (GSCP) in Ethiopia. Children negotiated with educators and city officials to access resources so they could advance their own education involving language development, social learning, and the performing arts. In the spirit of community service, ethical development, and mutual respect, the children reached out to elderly paupers who depended on alms for food, clothing, and shelter. In the deeply religious Orthodox tradition of Ethiopia, elderly mendicants who petition for alms in churchyards are viewed as having special skills to live by the hand of God (Butterfield, Kebede, & Gessesse, 2009).

To our knowledge, this is the first use of ABCD with children that is reported in the literature. The project took place in Africa, and outcomes show the power of ABCD in which children and their parents can become active change agents in community development. Although the use of ABCD methodology in diverse contexts has advanced worldwide (visit <http://abcdinaction.ning.com/>), there is little recognition of its relevance among

social workers addressing educational issues that children in poverty experience in their daily lives.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Population growth, rural-to-urban migration, and poverty are tied to housing deficiencies and acute problems of shelter in Addis Ababa. Since 1991, Ethiopia's emerging free market economy and economic progress have escalated the cost of new housing construction. Due to disparities between income levels and construction costs, many are unable to build homes and poor households often find market-rate rents simply unaffordable (Mulugeta & McLeod, 2004). To cope, poor households try to construct shanty-type houses in areas without access to water, sanitation, electricity, and roads. The worst conditions are evidenced by homeless people and families living along the streets in dwellings made of scavenged pieces of tin, tree branches, plastic sheets, and so on.

Gedam Sefer "monastery village" is a densely populated historical area in the Arada subcity of Addis Ababa, with 22,000 people living in 2,400 slum households; 40 percent of the households are female headed. Most households (83 percent) reside in government-owned *kebele houses*, which are typically poorly maintained and consist of one or two rooms; these houses are made of sticks and mud and lack indoor plumbing or functional kitchens. These families are large in size, live on an extremely low income, and are employed in petty trading or day labor (Arada Sub-City Kebele 03, 2004).

The GSCP has sought to improve the lives of poor families living in Gedam Sefer. The Oak Foundation supported the development of the GSCP and the time of the project coordinator, Mulu Yeneabat, an Ethiopian social worker with expertise in participatory action research. Graduate social work students from Addis Ababa School of Social Work volunteered in assessing the strengths of poor women and families in the community (Kebede & Butterfield, 2009). Yeneabat and Butterfield (2012) reported the ABCD process with adult community members involving parents, community elders, garbage collectors, and car washers. The GSCP upheld five ABCD building blocks: (1) mapping capacities and assets, (2) convening representative leaders as a steering council, (3) building relationships through problem solving, (4) mobilizing community assets, and

(5) leveraging resources. Initially, by attending open community meetings along with their parents, the children acquainted themselves with adult leaders and observed the emerging partnership. When time came for setting up small groups of leaders, children mentioned “claiming their child rights” and asked to be included as full members of the Core Group and as observers in the GSCP Technical Committee. Through such assertiveness, children positioned themselves within the adult-led partnership.

Many challenges involving adult training in ABCD as a bottom-up approach to community development surfaced early in the project. Suspicions held by community members regarding the nature of the partnership, the establishment of leadership by poor residents who by necessity invested much of their time in meeting their survival needs, and the lack of a legal structure for the new organization slowed and stalled the emerging GSCP. At this juncture, child leaders who were observing and participating in the adult process asked the project coordinator for an ABCD planning process of their own.

The ABCD process that occurred with children contrasted sharply with the process involving adults. Children were ready to act, and gradually many parents became enthusiastic supporters as they saw the benefits of participation accrue for their children. The receptivity of the children to ABCD was a function of their natural curiosity, their motivation to help their families and community members improve their quality of life, and a natural excitement they brought to social participation. The project thrived as a child-led grassroots, community-based effort of 100 children. The children elected members to the GSCP Children’s Subcommittee, which took responsibility for leading dialogue and, in general, for efforts to promote child well-being. Within the subcommittee, two children and two adults served as an advocacy unit responsible for linking the child-led planning to the adult-led partnership.

METHOD

The ABCD process in Gedam Sefer was grounded in action research in which participants assessed the strengths of poor community members and used a participatory process to mobilize their skills and build individual assets (Butterfield et al., 2009). The Oak Foundation did not require predefined

outcomes of child well-being. Rather, funds supported an ABCD planning process and training to implement it that would lead residents to identify projects that the community wanted, with funds set aside to implement such projects. The project coordinator facilitated and guided, but did not direct outcomes or make decisions. He attended, observed, and listened to recordings of the children’s meetings and theater performances. He translated material and flip-chart drawings and compiled 29 reports on GSCP activities and events (http://www.aboutsweep.org/gedam_sefer/index.html). Social work graduate students, GSCP leaders, and the principal investigator (PI) vetted these reports. This article draws on these documents, field notes, meeting minutes, and direct observations.

The study is subject to some limitations. Each country has its own context of culture and development. For impoverished parents in Ethiopia, the future of their children is paramount. Adults place the highest value on their children’s education because it serves as a major path out of poverty—if not for them, then for their children. Living conditions of urban poverty may differ. The children lived in a congested urban area where houses were situated immediately adjacent to each other. Many families lived in single-room structures and used common kitchens and latrines, thus contributing to their experience of communal life. Children played in small spaces adjoining households or on the street. In a sense, everyone knew one another. Bartlett (1999) pointed out that although formal research is lacking in children’s experience of the physical environment in poor urban settlements, “it is essential that the impact on children of conditions within their homes and neighbourhoods be recognized and understood” (p. 64).

Mutual help associations such as *Iddir* for burial assistance, and *Equb* for savings and lending, are found in every *kebele*, the smallest level of government similar to a ward or neighborhood. Kassahun (2011) reported that urban poor people involved in local associations in Ethiopia are often well motivated to participate in community development. Finally, Ethiopia espouses child rights, as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, as the defining protocol for ensuring child well-being. Cheney (2013) criticized the child rights paradigm for not facilitating child empowerment or social action, but in Ethiopia the

context of child rights opens the door for child-led and child-initiated activities. Notwithstanding these possible contextual differences, this documentation of ABCD can inform other methods and projects for facilitating child participation in community development and school-based social work in the United States and abroad.

ENGAGEMENT AND THE EARLY FORMATION OF THE CHILD-LED ABCD PROCESS

Enactment of Child-Led ABCD Project

Word about the opportunity for children to participate in ABCD planning meetings spread quickly from child to child and from parent to parent living in the neighborhood. Initially, 56 children, ages seven to 14, and representing grades 4 to 9, came to weekly meetings held on Saturdays and Sundays. The principal of a public school offered rooms in which children conducted more than 20 sessions over a 12-month period. Although the primary school offered meeting space, the children's efforts did not operate as a formally sanctioned school program. Academic learning in math, reading, writing, and English are emphasized in grades 1 through 6 to prepare students for seventh- and eighth-grade secondary school, and ninth- and 10th-grade high school. National exams separate students for precollege 11th and 12th grades, and again for college entrance.

At first the engagement process with children was challenging, because usually whoever calls the meeting leads the discussion and sets the agenda. However, in accord with ABCD principles, the discussion was to be led by the participants themselves, who, in this case, were children. Yeneabat insisted that the children elect their own facilitators and discuss issues they identified by themselves. As they came to appreciate their community from an asset perspective, the children became confident of their strengths alongside the authority and the opportunity to express their views.

Adults provided support and encouragement but stood apart from the children's process. When asked for clarification, Yeneabat and devoted community elders responded, but when asked for answers, the adults raised further questions to encourage the children to discuss the issues as they saw or experienced them in their daily lives. As one child stated, "There are youths and children who have talents and are willing to give training for youths and children in drama and painting,

if the community could facilitate places within the community or in school compounds." Frank's (2006) review of empirical studies on the potential of youth participation in planning states that such a stance by adults strengthens a child-led participatory culture.

The children elected six facilitators, three girls and three boys. No one told them to achieve gender balance, but they insisted on equal representation. The inclusion of girls was important in the ABCD process. Children were sensitive to gender discrimination in Ethiopian society, as indicated in their statement of potential solutions: "Give priority to girls and women education and other training and employment opportunities and reduce the discrimination." Another statement of potential solutions amplified how the community should be fair, be nondiscriminatory, and protect children: "Community members should question people who bring children from rural places with the false promise of sending them to school."

Discussions exceeded adult expectations. In their discussion groups, children had little to fear; they did not hide their feelings, attitudes, or knowledge about the community. Their assessment concluded that slum neighborhoods in Gedam Sefer incorporated many assets and strengths such as time, space in schools and in government halls, youths with different skills, elders and women with traditional skills, self-help *Iddir* groups, and small businesses. Children have skills and talents in sports and composing plays.

Disseminating ABCD Findings to Adults

The children invited the GSCP Core Group, Technical Committee, and others to listen to their ABCD assessment. Using drawings, flip charts, narratives, sociodrama, poems, art, and songs, they presented their findings to adults in their community and to local government and school officials. Similar to visual methods used in action research with Kampala street children (Young & Barrett, 2001), and young people's visual representations of urban environments in four countries (Béneker, Sanders, Tani, & Taylor, 2010), these modes of presentation helped the children characterize and communicate what they saw as strengths and assets, gaps, and potential solutions; Figure 1 and Figure 2 are examples.

The child-driven ABCD process sensitized parents to the skills and talents of their children as they

Figure 1: Putting Children in the Center of the Gedam Sefer Community



Figure 2: Depiction of the Need for Safe Places to Avoid Trafficking and Drug Use



convinced adult community members of the validity of their perceptions. Adult members of the GSCP viewed the children's work as an exemplar of asset assessment in Gedam Sefer. In response,

the adult-led GSCP formed four subcommittees: bylaws preparation, children well-being, family development, and youth development.

THE CHILDREN'S THEATER CLUB

The children identified three substantive gaps associated with their learning. School libraries did not have books, their mathematics and English language skills were weak, and there was an absence of places for children and youths to discuss, play, and participate in activities. The GSCP distributed a container of 40,000 books to schools and libraries through Books for Africa and organized a Summer Learning Program (SLP) with volunteers from the United States (Yeneabat & Butterfield, 2012). The children emphasized the importance of the arts and education:

If we have just a small room, then more will develop later, since the alphabet starts from a, then b. The training could be drama, arts, coaching. If schools give us permission to use just one room outside school hours, weekends, and holidays, together with community leaders we will take responsibility of taking care of the property and will not use the electric power, to avoid extra cost on the school. (Meeting Minutes #13, 2008, p. 2)

Near the end of the SLP, the children asked to perform plays that they had written and rehearsed. They presented a play in English and one in Amharic for their parents, community residents, and teachers. The children's plays captivated the interest of adult leaders who asked the children to present them again for recording. The Awelya Muslim Mission School offered two classrooms for rehearsals, and two groups rehearsed their plays over four weekends. One group composed a new play about stepmother-stepdaughter interaction.

With these successes, some children saw themselves as emerging playwrights, so as a group they asked the PI for drama training. Because this was not a skill held by GSCP members, the Candle Theatre Training Center received grant funding set aside for ABCD projects at 150 birr (US\$15) per child, per month for four months. Theater trainers were to focus *only* on offering instruction in performance techniques. On weekends and after school on Fridays, 22 children completed the first four months of training, followed by a second

cohort of 17 children. No one advised the children to compose or perform plays on issues associated with children; they knew well of abject poverty their families faced daily. In a densely populated slum, the prevalence of child trafficking, drug addiction, abuse, and poverty touched their lives and their neighbors. Their plays exposed gender discrimination; documented the lives of orphaned street children; and revealed the exploitation of children for begging, sex, and labor. As such, child participation in Gedam Sefer resulted in a more spontaneous theater for development than that reported in Tanzania (Nyohi, 2002).

Parents and guardians who observed the training attested to its benefits. One stated, "Thanks to the trainers, my child is getting what I could not give him and now he has a difference in his behavior." More than 10 mothers testified in public on positive behavioral changes in their children. One father was reluctant for his son to participate. When the children presented their plays in public, this father had been observing his son's behavior and his school performance for more than a year. He asked for the microphone, started by sobbing, and finished his speech with tears of joy.

I am sorry for my hesitance from the beginning. When I was asked to give my consent for my son to be engaged in this program, I was reluctant. Both I, and the entire neighborhood, know my son's behavior. It is not a secret. I asked, "What about his school? Doesn't this affect his performance?" You told me, "No, it is on the weekends." With respect for the Partnership leaders, I said, "Let's try it." What I gained and learned, and what my family and my neighbors got is complete peace with my son. This partnership is a school more than school.

Open and intensive children-led assessment and planning created a highly participatory process with theater arts as a way for the children themselves to take action in their community. The arts offer a practical way for children to represent the problems, assets, and strengths they observed or experienced daily in their families, neighborhoods, and local institutions, like schools. Positive and structured experiences in children's spare time enhance their resilience (Gilligan, 2000). Percy-Smith (2010) challenged adults to rethink child

participation by creating "social spaces or contexts" for young people, where they can "devise and decide on their own terms of participation and create their own opportunities through autonomous action and self-determination" (p. 117). The need for a social space prompted children to take action. The children debated using Saint George churchyard for a public performance but decided to ask the *kebele* administration to allow them to use the public hall. Receiving permission, they presented *Being a Corpse to Cheat*, *The Spoiled Daughter*, and *The Spoiling Father and the Evil Stepmother*. When officials admired the children's performance, and the topics they had chosen, the children explained that they practice plays in the open air, all the while tolerating the interruption of onlookers. They asked if they could use the hall to practice. One child stated,

If you [the *kebele*] give us the chance to use this hall, we can be more successful and you might be proud of us. We can practice our performances here, and show them free of charge to our neighborhood peers and community members. This will contribute to the well-being of the neighborhood children.

After a series of appeals, the children received permission to use the hall for practice three half-days each week, and for public presentations. Still, the children did not have much opportunity to use the hall because of other activities that took place there, such as traditional music clubs and meetings. Not dismayed, the children pressed their request. "We want only to claim our rights, and use our skills to better the community for children." Hearing their argument for child rights, the Culture and Sports Desk officer facilitated the children's use of the hall.

The children presented at the Candle Training Center's Pushkin Hall, Kebele 03/09 Hall, and at Addis Ababa University, where 36 children performed four productions for 100 government officials, and for child welfare and community development workers participating in the Integrated Community Development and Child Welfare Model of Practice (Butterfield, Scherrer, & Olcon, 2015). Local administrations invited them as guest performers during public gatherings and forums on children's issues. In April 2010, the drama group competed with 13 other groups in a competition

on Culture and Democracy for Development. The performance of their original plays won the competition. Two groups went on to compete at the subcity level within Addis Ababa, and among the 20 contestants, the Gedam Sefer troupe took first place. In competition with 10 subcity clubs at the Addis Ababa city level, they took first place.

Good Behavior and Outreach to Elderly Paupers

With these successes, the children organized themselves to form the GSCP Children's Theater Club and expanded their group activities beyond the performance of plays. In September, on the eve of the Ethiopian New Year, they pledged to say good-bye to their previous bad behaviors, practice good manners, and lend assistance to one another. The children talked about the personal changes they sought to make, and if a child did not admit his or her negative behaviors, others reminded that child. The children discussed the rules for being a member; those who did not want to keep the rules could not be members. They pledged to improve their academic performance without failing grades, do assignments before coming to activities, assist their parents, and get permission before attending a club event. They promised to be good role models, assist each other in academic exercises, avoid misbehaving friends, and show respect for elders.

In reflecting on these promises, the children remembered the elderly paupers who watched their play practices. In [Camfield's \(2010\)](#) research, Ethiopian children share meanings of relative poverty as "stew without bread or bread without stew" (p. 271) and social exclusion that includes a person's appearance and clothing. In this sense, club members saw themselves as relatively well-off compared with the 17 impoverished elderly paupers at Saint George churchyard. On the Ethiopian Christmas, they asked their parents for food prepared for the holidays and placed it in their lunchboxes so they could distribute it to the elders they sought to help. They presented short poems, entertained with jokes, sang songs, and performed the play *An Old Beggar Lady with a Daughter and a Son*. That the children reached out to older people, especially those who were characterized as paupers, is significant in community engagement. The children themselves made this decision and organized the outreach project. In Ethiopian society, reaching out to those who have little, especially during

the holidays, and particularly to the elderly, represents a selfless act of community service. In the child-led ABCD project, the children recognized selflessness as service designed to improve community life.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

The ABCD project raises important questions about the nature of the primary school curriculum in which pedagogical experiences limited to the classroom prepare children for standardized testing enforced by a centralized educational authority. School social workers often assume responsibility for engaging students who do not adjust well to such a regimen, but their role is largely confined to involving parents more closely in their children's education and behavioral problems, and providing counseling, support services, referrals, and so on ([Constable, 2016](#)). Children whose learning is compromised by mental health issues are supported through individual educational plans or disability accommodations through Section 504 of the [Rehabilitation Act of 1973 \(P.L. 93-112\)](#) for behavioral issues that disrupt classroom learning. By expanding the social work role to ABCD-based initiatives, social workers can augment the learning experience for all children, helping them to learn firsthand, not only about the needs of their communities, but also about how they can address those needs through an ABCD group process as creative and innovative local change agents.

In the ABCD project, social workers were an important source of facilitation and guidance for the children—even those with well-known behavioral problems—undertaking their own community-based service initiative. Social workers helped children become active in social development, a process the participants steered and enacted. In addition, social workers supported the involvement of the children's parents, who came to see the ABCD project as a vital way of learning for and from their children.


ABCD methodology not only lends itself to educational engagement of children in service and community affairs, but also can incorporate theater and the fine arts, humanities, and social sciences in interdisciplinary learning. ABCD projects can incorporate the teaching of educational content relevant to place-based learning. By appreciating the strengths and assets of local communities, social

workers can sensitize children to the cultural formation of their living situations. The group life emerging from the ABCD process is one of those assets, and as children come to better understand their communities and the strengths and assets they possess, children can then become strategic in the action they take to engage in asset-based capacity building for themselves, their families, and their peers. Group work is a social work strategy of change, and ABCD fosters the development of groups within which children can form communities of learning. Those communities can involve children themselves who interact with adults to bring about substantive assets in their neighborhoods.

From this project, readers can discern the flexibility of ABCD methodology. Through ABCD methodology, children and adult facilitators—whether educators or school social workers—can engage community members in creating assets. In practical ways, such assets can affect the community as a whole, various groups such as elderly people, and children and their families. The children themselves became the principal agents of change in actualizing a theater in Gedam Sefer. Such realism can foster the self-efficacy of children at a young age because it is through an ABCD project that new community resources can come into existence.

ABCD methodology can form community contexts fostering the enrichment of children who may find traditional methods of education too limiting or lacking relevance. Within such contexts, children can learn academic skills and competencies through alternative means, and the soft skills inherent in the development of children, particularly as social agents, through efforts to improve the neighborhood in which they reside. Students learned seven kinds of skills through their ABCD projects. The first two are communicating and negotiating with decision makers and envisioning the preferred end of their action, involving both their cognitive projection of what they sought as a product of their efforts and the emotional inspiration they gained in envisioning their goal. The next two are learning directly about leadership in small groups and developing sympathetic regard for the plight of others whom the children, even though living in poverty, saw as more disadvantaged and needful than themselves. The remaining three are obtaining added information about

the history and culture of place; understanding the challenges inherent in self-governing at a community level; and strengthening literacy through the use of language, reflected especially in their work as playwrights.

An ABCD strategy is an inclusive method for involving children, their parents, and even multiple generations in community development and, as a result, children can learn directly about how to advance quality of life within their communities. ABCD methods hold considerable promise in achieving educational outcomes that children may be unable to reach within a classroom. As a way of learning, ABCD methods can have a direct positive impact on the quality of life within communities and address gaps in community assets for children. 

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